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ABSTRACT

Research has found that most people tend to rate themselves as above average on desirable skills or qualities and below average on undesirable qualities. Two factors have been found to influence this self-serving bias: (1) controllability or the perceived control one has over developing a trait; and (2) trait ambiguity in which a positive trait may be easily tailored to fit one's self-conception. In this study, 54 college students rated either themselves, a close friend, or an average college student on a list of 32 traits. Self-serving and group-serving biases were detected in the group. Subjects rated themselves and their friends higher than the average student on positive traits and lower on negative traits. Subjects did rate the average college student higher on positive traits than on negative traits overall, which may reflect a group-serving bias or a desire to appear fair. Nevertheless, the positive traits assigned to the average student possessed high ambiguity and low controllability so that the rater could continue to think that he or she was still better than the average student on those traits. (RJM)

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Trait Ambiguity and Controllability in Evaluations of Self and Others

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Running Head: AMBIGUITY AND CONTROLLABILITY

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Abstract

Research has found that the majority of people tends to rate themselves as above average on desirable skills or qualities, and below average on undesirable qualities. Two factors that have been found to influence this self-serving bias are the perceived control one has over developing a trait and the ambiguity of the trait. The results from the present study demonstrated a tendency to rate one's self and one's friends higher than the average student on positive traits and lower on negative traits. Controllability and ambiguity were significant factors in only one condition: the average student was rated very highly on high ambiguity, low controllability, high desirability traits. Explanations are offered in terms of subjects attempting to appear fair and impartial while also maintaining their own self-esteem.

Trait Ambiguity and Controllability in Evaluations of Self and Others

When people are asked to describe skills or qualities they possess, the descriptions often tend to reflect inflated self-evaluation. People may be motivated to see themselves in a favorable light in order to protect and enhance their sense of self-esteem (Alicke, 1985; Sherwood, 1967) and/or due to a desire to maintain a positive public image (Bradley, 1978). It has been suggested that it is easier to maintain this self-serving bias if the definition of a particular trait is ambiguous. That is, the easier it is to tailor and refine the definition of the positive trait to fit one's conception of the self, the more likely it is that the person will judge it as a part of the self (Dunning, Meyerowitz & Holzberg, 1989; Felson, 1981; Sherwood, 1967).

In addition to ambiguity, some researchers have suggested that people will also inflate their ratings of themselves on positive traits that are perceived to be within their personal control (Alicke, 1985). This may follow the self-esteem motive hypothesis. Self-esteem is enhanced if people believe that they have developed desirable skills through effort and natural

ability, and that desirable outcomes are within their control in the future. On the other hand, if traits are not perceived to be in the person's control, then self-esteem may not be threatened if one has not developed them. The present study examines both the controllability and ambiguity of traits in determining self-serving and group-serving biases.

Method

Subjects

Ambiguity rating sample. Twenty subjects in an advanced undergraduate psychology course initially rated the ambiguity of traits to be selected for the experiment.

Evaluation of self and others sample. For the "main" experiment, 54 students enrolled in Introductory Psychology classes received extra course credit for their participation. All subjects signed a consent form at the beginning of the experiment, and were debriefed at the conclusion of the session.

Ratings of Ambiguity

A list of 68 adjectives was taken from Alicke's (1985) study. That study had developed categories of traits varying on desirability and controllability. The list was administered to 20 subjects in an initial

sample in the present study who rated each word from "describes one and only one type of behavior" to "describes many different possible behaviors, possible in many different situations." The four words with the highest ambiguity ratings and the four with the lowest ambiguity ratings for each of the four sublists (high desirability/high controllability; high desirability/ low controllability; low desirability/high controllability; and low desirability/low controllability) were then selected to create a final list of 32 traits: four traits in each of eight--2 (high and low desirability) X 2 (high and low controllability) X 2 (high and low ambiguity)-- conditions.

Procedure

A ratings form listing the 32 traits was given to the 54 subjects. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of three sets of instructions that accompanied the list: rate themselves on the traits, rate a close friend, or rate the average college student. Ratings were made using a nine-point scale from, 1=This trait definitely does not describe you (him/her; the average college student) to 9=This trait definitely describes you (him/her; the average college student).

Results

The mean of the ratings of the four traits within each of the eight conditions was the dependent measure. A 3 (self vs. friend vs. average student) X 2 (high vs. low desirability) X 2 (high vs. low ambiguity) X 2 (high vs. low controllability) analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted on these means. The last three independent variables were repeated measures factors. Because of the large number of comparisons (15 tests), an alpha level of .01 was employed for all analyses. Four significant effects were found. First, a main effect of desirability, $F(1,5)=232.57$, $p<.0001$, revealed that subjects made higher mean ratings of the high desirable traits ($M=6.6$) than the low desirable traits ($M=3.6$).

A Desirability X Target Person interaction was found, $F(2,51)=19.89$, $p<.0001$, which demonstrated the self-serving and group-serving bias. Subjects rated themselves significantly higher on high desirable traits ($M=7.1$) than on low desirable traits ($M=3.1$), $F(1,17)=191.40$, $p<.0001$. Subjects also rated a friend higher on high desirable traits ($M=7.0$) than on low desirable traits ($M=3.1$), $F(1,17)=89.10$, $p<.0001$. Subjects also rated the average student higher on high

desirable traits (M=5.7) than on low desirable traits (M=4.5), and although this difference was much less pronounced, it was still a significant effect, $F(1,17)=14.96$, $p<.01$.

A Controllability X Ambiguity interaction was also found to be significant, $F(1,51)=8.04$, $p<.01$. Post-hoc tests revealed a significant simple main effect of ambiguity in the low controllability condition only, $F(1,51)=11.38$, $p<.01$, with higher ratings of the high ambiguity traits (M=5.3) than the low ambiguity traits (M=4.9).

Finally, there was a significant four-way interaction, $F(2,51)=5.18$, $p<.01$. To interpret this interaction, separate 2 (Desirability) X 2 (Ambiguity) X 2 (Controllability) ANOVAs were conducted for each of the three target persons. The only significant three-way interaction was obtained in the ratings of the average student, $F(1,17)=10.02$, $p<.01$. The next step was to conduct separate 2 (Ambiguity) X 2 (Controllability) ANOVAs for the ratings of high desirable and low desirable traits, among average student ratings only. This analysis revealed a significant two-way interaction in the high desirability condition only, $F(1,17)=9.73$, $p<.01$, with

the average student receiving much higher ratings in the high ambiguity/low controllability condition (M=6.9) than in the other three conditions (M's ranging from 5.2 to 5.7).

Discussion

The most obvious finding of the present study was the presence of self-serving and group-serving biases. Somewhat unexpected was the finding that subjects also rated the average college student higher on positive traits than on negative traits, although this effect was much less than that found in self- and friend-ratings.

The other major finding was the high ratings given to the average student in the high desirability/high ambiguity/low controllability condition. In fact, the magnitude of the discrepancy between the ratings in this condition and the ratings of the average student in the other conditions can account for the other significant effects. The interpretation offered here is that subjects are motivated to give some positive ratings to the average student. One motivation may be a reflection of the group-serving bias: the subjects doing the ratings are members of the group to which the average student belongs--they are both students.

Another motivation may be a desire to appear fair and even-handed: rating the average student low or average on all positive traits may appear self-serving, so subjects choose some traits on which to rate the average student more positively.

Regardless of the motivation, the traits which are used to rate the average student highly are selected to maintain the subject's self-esteem, as well. Thus, the positive traits that are selected are those that can be interpreted in a variety of ways (high ambiguity) so that the subject can continue to think that he or she is still better than the average student on those traits. The traits selected are also those of low controllability because these are, by definition, the ones that a person's effort would not be sufficient to create or eliminate, anyway, and therefore, less threatening to one's self-esteem.

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